

Inspect the Broadcasters' Public Files

All stations are required to maintain public files that include information about station ownership, educational and community affairs programming and public complaints. Even though the information is intended for the public, accessing it is inconvenient. The FCC wants to put the public files online to make them easier to access, but broadcasters are fighting this common-sense initiative. What are they hiding?

Inspect the public files at your local stations to find out.

Before You Go

- Call the station(s) to make an appointment. Appointments are not required, but most stations appreciate the advance notice.

What to Bring

- Bring friends. Invite other local media reformers to join you.
- Bring a digital camera or cellphone to take pictures during your visit.
- Bring money for copies and collect receipts for any copying charges. Stations are allowed to charge a "reasonable rate" for copies, though often they will make copies for free. Please note that Free Press is unable to reimburse volunteers for copies. In most cases, the cost of copies will not exceed \$20 — be sure to inquire about the rate at the beginning of your visit and budget accordingly. If paying for photocopies represents a hardship, taking pictures of documents with a digital camera or cellphone is a good alternative.
- Bring information about the station's ownership. Before your visit, check the map at ChangetheChannels.org to find out if any of your local stations are covertly consolidated. If they are, print out the listing on our map and bring it with you for reference. If the station is not covertly consolidated, you can find information about the station's ownership on Wikipedia.
- Print out the Public File Inspection Checklist and use it as a guide during the inspection.

What to Expect

- Stations are required to show the public files to anyone who asks to see them. Show up at your appointed time during regular business hours and ask to see the public file. You don't need to explain why you want to see the file. For more information on viewing stations' public files, please consult the FCC guide [The Public and Broadcasting: How to Get the Most Service from Your Local Station](#).
- Station staff will most likely be courteous and helpful. But if they're rude, unhelpful or unwilling to show you the file, take note.
- Station staff will either take you directly to the files, or they may ask which files you're looking for and bring those files to you. They may leave you alone with the files, or they may stay with you while you inspect the files.
- The public file will most likely consist of papers in file folders. However, if parts of the public file are on a computer database, the station must provide you with a computer terminal to examine them.
- We don't expect volunteers to encounter press inquiries. However, if you are approached by any reporters, please direct them to Free Press Media Manager Jenn Ettinger at 202-265-1490, ext. 35.

At the Station

- Use our Public File Inspection Checklist to guide you through your visit.
- Ask to see the station's Issues/Programs Lists for the past two quarters. These lists are filed quarterly and document which local issues the station covered and how it covered them.
- Ask for the station's political file for the past two to three months. The political file contains information about what political ads were aired during this period, and who paid for them.
- If the station is covertly consolidated, ask to see the Local Marketing Agreement, Joint Operating Agreement, Time Brokerage Agreement or Shared Services Agreement. If the station does not have copies of these agreements on file, make a note.
- You should request photocopies of all documents noted on the Public File Inspection Checklist. The station is required to make any photocopies that you request, either for free or for a "fair price." If you're asking for several copies, they may want to mail them to you. The station must pay postage to send the photocopies and must send them within seven days.

More on Political Files

The station's political file contains a range of information regarding political advertising that has been purchased at the station — including the date(s) and time(s) that the advertising aired, the rate charged and the name of the candidate referenced. The file should also contain detailed information about who purchased the advertisement (i.e., a campaign, a PAC, a Super PAC or a third-party organization).

The political file itself is typically a filing cabinet with several different folders inside it — likely one for each campaign, PAC, Super PAC or third-party group that purchased political advertising. It's very important to get copies of these files (see the checklist for instructions on which portions of the political file to copy). The information PACs, Super PACs and third-party groups are required to disclose can help us learn who is really paying for ads. Stations vary on how far back their records go, but generally speaking the most recent two to three months should be sufficient.

If possible, write down all the names of the folders in the political file. This will help provide the full picture of who is buying advertising at the station. Again, this is important only for the most recent two to three months.

Follow Up

- After your visit, please send us your checklist, along with pictures and photocopies of documents, as soon as possible. You may email your information to channels@freepress.net. Paper copies can be mailed to:

Free Press
ATTN: Libby Reinish
40 Main St., Suite 301
Florence, MA 01062

We will review the materials upon receipt. We will inform you if we find that any files you inspected reveal a violation of FCC rules.

Thank you for taking the time to inspect the public files at your local broadcast stations! Your assistance is invaluable.

